

ON THE RELEVANCE OF AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, higher educational theory seems to be concerned with positional thinking that reconsiders what universities ought to accomplish to justify their existence in the realm of higher education (Waghid and Davids, 2020). I want to extend this claim by arguing in defence of an African philosophy of higher education – one that is genuine and enframes higher education as a pedagogical space for resistance, critique, deliberative iterations, autonomy, and intellectual activism. Put differently, an African philosophy of higher education is one that is not only concerned with thinking and justification but expands into notions of democratic engagement, citizenship, and activism. When the latter are present, African philosophy of higher education has a real chance of manifesting ubiquitously in higher pedagogical actions, mostly teaching and learning. Only then, it possibly maintains its relevance to higher education discourses.

Keywords: African philosophy, higher education, pedagogy of resistance, deliberations, critique

IN DEFENCE OF AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Like any philosophy, an African philosophy of higher education also has a purpose. At least three meanings and/or practices come to mind when enacting such a philosophy of higher education. Invariably an African philosophy of higher education is a philosophical activity that accentuates the importance of intellectual activism. Such a form of activism is constituted by at least the following practices as enunciated below:

I

When African philosophers of education exercise their activism, they do so with a profound sense of democratic iterations. This means they encourage one another to collaborate, questioning one another's shared understanding of ideas, situations, and events in the world. Collaboration assumes the form of deliberation where people are obliged to listen to one another's points of view, albeit diverse and different. People in deliberative engagement are

bound together by virtue of articulation, listening, and talking back to one another so that what is engaged with ensues as a result of contestation and a desire to agree and or disagree. Deliberative engagement is by no means a way whereby people simply quarrel. Instead, when people deliberate, they engage and exchange thoughts based on one another's justifications for the claims they might have proffered. Dissensus is not a reason to hold people apart. Rather, it provides an opportunity for ensuing reflection about matters on which no agreement could be found. As long as people remain in deliberation, there is always more to know and more to learn and consensus is not necessarily a desired outcome of deliberation. The desired outcome is that there will always remain another opportunity for further reflection and openness to what is still to come. To permanently abort deliberations would result in the end of encounters – a situation that a living African philosophy of higher education cannot allow. A living African philosophy of higher education remains reflectively open to what remains in becoming (Davids and Waghid 2021). And, the activist African philosopher of higher education seizes opportunities to pursue deliberative iterations that can enhance human understanding of things in the world.

II

An African philosophy of higher education is concerned with the cultivation of citizenship in the world. In this regard, humans ought to strive for co-belonging and co-existence in a diverse and pluricultural African society. Co-belonging involves humans recognising one another's diverse and opposing cultures and ways of living without imposing their own ways of living on one another. The possibility that humans co-belong happens because people's commonalities and differences are given due consideration. Co-belonging implies that there should be no condition of belonging. Similarly, humans who co-belong enact their responsibilities towards one another so that they do not exclude one another from a world republic. To act responsibly towards one another implies that humans are there for one another without resorting to hatred, vengeance, humiliation, and torture – the aspects of inhumane life. It is here that *ubuntu*, as a form of human co-existence and dignity, surfaces because of its (*ubuntu*) insistence that humans remain bound together in a spirit of cooperative engagement and mutual respect. Co-belonging can extend towards cosmopolitan-*ubuntu* in the sense that humans recognise one another's differences and otherness with the hope of pursuing societal matters in a hospitable way.

III

An African philosophy of higher education encourages activism as humans engage in critique (Waghid and Davids 2020). When humans act critically, they provoke one another to see things

in alternate ways, thus creating possibilities for resistance, opposition, and dissonance. Looking at higher educational matters in such ways implies that teachers and students should act both consensually and oppositionally. When they do so, they evoke one another's potential to act with strangeness and discomfort. To be in a state of discomfort means to experience sudden upheavals of thought – a phrase I borrowed from Michel Foucault (1988) – that can give rise to other possibilities and or opportunities. So, critique is geared towards disruption in the sense that people are provoked to think with dissonance whereby teachers and students act freely and subject their own thoughts to scrutiny by others, in an atmosphere of unease and controversy. The position I hold is similar to what Jacques Rancière (2011) refers to as putting into question without unravelling matters of educational concern. It is to infer meanings not previously present, which is tantamount to thinking that unsettles in both agreement and disagreement.

TOWARDS PROFFERING A POSITION

The notion of an African philosophy of higher education is real and relevant to higher education discourses on the African continent and perhaps elsewhere. Such a philosophy of higher education not only enframes higher education as a pedagogical space for resistance, critique, and deliberative iterations, but concomitantly advances transformative and autonomous actions commensurate with an intellectual activist stance. When an African philosophy of higher education manifests in human practices, it not only concerns itself with thinking and justification but expands into notions of democratic engagement, citizenship, and activism. When the latter are present, African philosophy of higher education has a real chance of manifesting ubiquitously in higher pedagogical actions, mostly teaching and learning.

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